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ABSTRACT

School leaders can generate student motivation by creating an atmosphere where academic success and the motivation to learn are expected and rewarded. Leaders can create a school culture conducive to learning by shaping the instructional climate and using activities and symbols to communicate goals. School restructuring that creates a positive psychological environment also influences student motivation. School leaders can create this environment by establishing policies and programs that: stress goal-setting and self-regulation, offer student choice, reward "personal bests," foster teamwork, and teach time management skills. A school's organizational structure is another influence, which can offer intrinsic rewards and enhance student autonomy. School leadership can also promote motivation by demonstrating a school value system that creates consensus around goals related to motivation and achievement. Lessons from the school leader's personal life and from noneducational settings can also be applied to education. Recognizing and rewarding success in all forms is important. (LMI)

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School Leadership and Student Motivation

by Ron Renchler

Much of the recent research on student motivation has rightly centered on the classroom, where the majority of learning takes place and where students are most likely to acquire a strong motivation to gain new knowledge. Making the classroom a place that naturally motivates students to learn is much easier when students and teachers function in an atmosphere where academic success and the motivation to learn are expected and rewarded. Such an atmosphere, especially when motivation to learn evolves into academic achievement, is a chief characteristic of an effective school.

How Can School Leaders Generate Student Motivation?

An environment that nurtures educational motivation can be cultivated in the home, in the classroom, or throughout an entire school. One of the most effective avenues for engendering student motivation is a school's culture. According to Deal (1987), school culture can be embodied and transformed through channels such as shared values, heroes, rituals, ceremonies, stories, and cultural networks.

Davis (1989) suggests using a wide variety of activities and symbols to communicate motivational goals. "Visible symbols," he says, "illustrate and confirm what is considered to be important in the school." He suggests using "school newsletters, statements of goals, behavior codes, rituals, symbols, and legends" to "convey messages of what the school really values." Staging academic awards assemblies, awarding trophies for academic success and displaying them in trophy cases, scheduling motivational speakers, and publicizing students' success can help them see that the desire to be successful academically is recognized and appreciated.

Klug (1989) notes that school leaders can influence levels of motivation by "shaping the school's instructional climate," which in turn shapes "the attitudes of teachers, students, parents, and the community at large toward education." By effectively managing this aspect of a school's culture, principals can "increase both student and teacher motivation and indirectly impact learning gains," Klug says.

Can School Restructuring Plans Be Used to Increase Student Motivation?

School administrators can take advantage of times of educational change by including strategies for increasing student motivation. Acknowledging that school restructuring is inevitable, Maehr (1991) challenges school leaders to ensure that "motivation and the investment in learning of students will be enhanced" as a result of school reform. School leaders have seldom "considered motivation vis-a-vis the current restructuring movement," he says, "and few have considered that the school as an entity in its own right, may have effects that supersede those of individual classrooms and the acts of individual teachers."

A positive "psychological environment" strongly influences student motivation, says Machr. School leaders can create this type of environment by establishing policies and programs that:

- stress goal setting and self-regulation/management
- offer students choices in instructional settings
- reward students for attaining "personal best" goals
- foster teamwork through group learning and problem-solving experiences
- replace social comparisons of achievement with self-assessment and evaluation techniques
- teach time management skills and offer self-paced instruction when possible

How Does a School's Organizational Structure Influence Levels of Student Motivation?

School structures sometimes perpetuate feelings of low self-worth and low levels of motivation among students. "Teachers and parents worry that [students] are unmotivated," Raffini (1988) says. "In reality, they are highly motivated to protect their sense of self-worth." He suggests using individual goal-setting structures, outcome-based instruction and evaluation, attribution retraining, and cooperative learning activities to remove motivational barriers and redirect student behavior away from failure-avoiding activities in academic settings. Raffini describes how these four strategies can aid in promoting the rediscovery of an interest in learning:

Individual goal-setting structures allow students to define their own criteria for success.

Outcome-based instruction and evaluation make it possible for slower students to experience success without having to compete with faster students.

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Attribution retraining can help apathetic students view failure as a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability.

Cooperative learning activities help students realize that personal effort can contribute to group as well as individual goals.

Several other researchers have criticized current instructional practices that sometimes hinder the development of motivation. Representative of these critics are Stipek (1988) and Eccles, Midgeley, and Adler (1984). Stipek makes a strong case for strengthening the degree of intrinsic motivation students feel for learning. While she does not argue for the complete elimination of extrinsic reward systems, she believes that "there are many benefits to maximizing intrinsic motivation and many ways to foster it." Challenging but fair task assignments, the use of positive classroom language, mastery-based evaluation systems, and cooperative learning structures are among the methods she suggests.

Eccles, Midgeley, and Adler argue that motivation would increase if students were asked to assume "greater autonomy and control over their lives and learning" as they proceed through higher grade levels. They note that this process rarely takes place in most schools and recommend that school leaders create an "environment that would facilitate task involvement rather than ego involvement, particularly as children enter early adolescence."

Does a School Leader's Motivation to Succeed Influence Student Motivation?

The work of Leithwood and Montgomery (1984) is especially helpful in understanding the connections between a school administrator's motivation and the level of motivation that exists among students.

According to Leithwood and Montgomery, school administrators progress through a series of stages as they become more effective. At their highest level of effectiveness, they come to understand that "people are normally motivated to engage in behaviours which they believe will contribute to goal achievement. The strength of one's motivation to act depends on the importance attached to the goal in question and one's judgement about its achievability. Motivational strength also depends on one's judgement about how successful a particular behavior will be in moving toward goal achievement."

Personal motivation on the part of the principal can translate into motivation among students and staff through the functioning of goals, according to Leithwood and Montgomery. "Personally valued goals," they say, "are a central element in the principal's motivational structure—a stimulus for action."

Establishing, communicating, and creating consensus around goals related to motivation and educational achievement can be a central feature of a school leader's own value system.

What Else Can School Leaders Do?

The complex array of problems that contribute to low levels of student motivation makes it impossible to devise a single, programmatic approach that will suddenly turn poorly motivated students into young people hungry for knowledge. Engendering student motivation is an ongoing process that requires creativity and energy. Grossnickle (1989) provides useful charts and inventories for monitoring motivation levels and lists many helpful ideas for promoting positive attitudes about motivation.

Here are a few other steps school leaders can take to improve student motivation at the school level:

- Analyze the ways that motivation operates in your own life and develop a clear way of communicating it to teachers and students.
- Seek ways to demonstrate how motivation plays an important role in noneducational settings, such as in sports and in the workplace.
- Show students that success is important. Recognize the variety of ways that students can succeed. Reward success in all its forms.
- Develop or participate in inservice programs that focus on motivation.
- Involve parents in discussing the issue of motivation and give them guidance in fostering it in their children.
- Demonstrate through your own actions that learning is a lifelong process that can be pleasurable for its own sake.

Resources

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